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ABSTRACT

Noting the difficult decision faced by educators each year regarding the placement of students who are not performing at grade level, this paper examines issues related to social promotion and retention of elementary school students and presents the findings of a questionnaire study of elementary school teachers in New York. The paper argues that neither social promotion nor retention meets the needs of students who fail to achieve and makes a variety of suggestions for improving the learning environment, including using mixed age groups. The study described entailed a 10-item questionnaire distributed to 20 kindergarten through fifth grade teachers in one public school. The findings indicated that 60 percent of the teachers believed that students should not be socially promoted if they had below average grades. Seventy percent believed that students should not remain with their peers if their grades were below average. Thirty percent agreed that behavior problems would occur due to retention. All the teachers questioned agreed that primary grades were the best choice for retention. All agreed that a smaller class size provided a better learning environment. Eighty percent thought that the present class day was long enough. Sixty percent did not favor an extended school year. Sixty percent were undecided about using mixed age groups. Eighty percent thought that students should not be grouped homogeneously. Forty percent were undecided about whether raising standards would meet the needs of at-risk students and 40 percent believed that raising standards would not meet their needs. (KB)

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# *ISSUES OF SOCIAL PROMOTION*

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## *ABSTRACT*

The purpose of this article was to research the issues of social promotion and retention in a public school in the Bronx, New York. The participating teachers were elementary school teachers from kindergarten to fifth grade. A questionnaire was given to twenty teachers dealing with questions pertaining to their point of view on the issues of social promotion. Responses from the teachers indicated that most teachers do not support social promotion. Many felt that students with low grades should not remain with their peers. Teachers who participated in the research were consistent in their responses indicating that social promotion and retention were not in the best interest of the students.

# ISSUES OF SOCIAL PROMOTION

The pendulum swings back and forth as educators are setting new standards for students promotion and retention (Starr, 1997, p.1). What should be done when students are not on grade level? Are they retained or socially promoted to the next grade. These issues and many more educators and administrators are faced with each year when students fall below grade level.

## WHAT IS SOCIAL PROMOTION?

Social promotion is the practice of promoting a student from one grade to the next regardless of academic achievement. A recent study conducted on October 6, 1997 by the American Federation of Teachers, (AFT), one of the world's largest teacher unions, found that many U.S. school districts practice social promotion, despite public policies – and sometimes laws – meant to prevent it. Social promotion says the AFT report is "rampant" in this country. In fact, many school systems, overwhelmed by increasing number of ill-prepared and unmotivated students, regard social promotion as a necessary and unavoidable evil (Starr, 1997, p. 2).

Social promotion creates a bias towards students with poor academic grades by promoting these students to the next grade so that they can remain with their peers.

Social promotion forces teachers to accept an impossible range of student's knowledge and readiness, and forces them to be able to prepare students so that they can achieve on grade level. It does not help the students get the resources needed so that they don't fall between the cracks and eventually drop out of school.

## IS RETENTION THE ANSWER?

In some districts retention is allowed only one time from Kindergarten through eighth grade. Some children will benefit from appropriate placement and will mature from an extra year in the same grade. On the other hand, other children will take an offensive attitude, and this will cause them to get into trouble. These students may dislike school and eventually may even drop out. Most students never seem to catch up with their peers. They begin to feel badly about themselves more often than children who do go on to the next grade level, and this leads to low self-esteem (Robertson, 1997, pp.1, 2).

Many teachers believe that retention in the early grades prevents problems in the later grades. They feel that the early grades are the fundamental years and this builds the foundation of their education, and it is easier to hold over a child in the lower grades than in the higher grades.

The practice of retention in a given number of schools gives the impression that accountability and standards are being enforced, but may neglect the real cause of student failure (Robertson, 1997, p. 2).

## WHO MAY BE RETAINED?

Students with persistent academic problems from kindergarten through the primary grades who are on the verge of becoming at risk students, and may eventually drop out of school. Students with a history of behavioral or disruptive problems, and have been retained once since they entered the educational system, and have maintained average or below average grades. Students with a pattern of absenteeism that has caused them to fall below grade level, their goals and confidence are limited, and they eventually drop out of school. Students with limited English-Language skills and limited resources for them to achieve will also be at risk and may eventually drop out of school.

Students with low socioeconomic status may be victims of low birth weight and poor nutrition, and parental exposure to drugs and AIDS. These parents may have rigid, authoritarian beliefs about how their children should be raised and negative view about their level of reading. They enter public schools that lack the resources to provide them with the special attention they need for success (Renchler, 1993, pp. 1, 2). They may be the victims of child abuse or neglect, and parents who are unwilling or unable to intercede for them (Robertson, 1997).

## FINDING SOLUTIONS

Social promotion and retention are inadequate to the needs of most students. What must be addressed is why children fail, and institute widespread changes that will prevent failure from the beginning (Starr, 1997, p. 3).

Sandra Feldman, President of AFT said, "that neither social promotion nor retention is the answer, if the goal is getting kids to achieve." She urged a policy of "intensive care" for at-risk students (Dyke, 1997 p. 1).

Smaller class size in the primary grades that will improve the learning environment for all students (Robertson, 1997, p. 3). When class size goes down, learning goes up. It improves student's achievement, particularly in the early grades and among students who are disadvantaged due to their socioeconomic background. In smaller class size students who may be at risk can be identified and given consistent support throughout the year.

Mixed age groups where the age span is greater than one year and the emphasis is on interaction and cooperation among children of various ages. In this setting children with different experiences and stages of development turn to each other for help. The goal is to let children progress according to their individual rate of learning and development without being compelled to meet age-related achievement expectations.

Mixed age grouping can provide older children with opportunities to be helpful, patient and tolerant of younger peers. With the grouping the younger children will have a behavior models to follow, and emulate to younger students when they themselves are the older students (Katz, 1992 p. 1, 2). In this environment students learn at their own rate and advance to the next stage when they have mastered the required skills without the restriction of grade-level labeling (Robertson, 1997 p. 2).

Alternative educational settings may include an extended day, a summer program, or year round education. In these settings students have opportunities for projects and "hand on" approach to learning (Robertson, 1997 p. 3). These programs will help students who are disadvantaged and for whom English is a second language. Students in low socioeconomic status should be placed in programs that teach them how to participate in large academic groups, complete their work independently, and move effectively between classroom activities (Renchler, 1993 p. 3). Over a long summer vacation students who are disadvantaged and for whom English is a second language seem to forget some of what they have learned, and teachers have to spend more time reviewing instead of teaching new materials (Weaver, 1992 p. 1, 2).

## MY PROCEDURE

I decided to conduct a survey to find out the teachers point of view on social promote and retention. I conducted my survey in a public school in the Bronx, New York with teachers who teach students from Kindergarten to fifth grade. The survey was distributed to teachers individually and returned by hand. The survey was completed over a two weeks period in October 1999. Since the survey was given to colleagues in the work place, permission was not required.

The purpose was to collect information on the issues of social promotion and retention in a public school setting. Every participant was given the same ten questions to answer, which focused on social promotion, retention, class size and longer school day or year. Responses were to place an X in either a yes, no or undecided box. They were also asked if they would give a written respond to the questions.

## WHAT TEACHERS THINK

What I Learned was that 60% of the teachers felt students should not be socially promoted if their grades are below average, 10% were undecided, and 30% stated that administrative policy was to socially promote students. Seventy percent of the teachers felt that students shouldn't remain with their peers if their grades are below average, 20% were undecided, 10% felt that they should stay with their peers. Sixty percent of the teachers felt that students should be held over if their grades are below average, 30% felt that behavior problems would occur due to being retained, and 10% were undecided. All the teachers agreed that the primary grades Kindergarten, first, and second grade are the grades that students should be held over. One hundred percent of the teachers agreed that smaller class size provides a better learning environment. Eighty percent of the teachers felt that the present day is long enough, and 20% were undecided. Sixty percent of the teachers felt that students and teachers need time away from each other, so an extended year was not looked upon as favorable, 30% were undecided and 10% felt an extended

year would be good for some students. Sixty percent of the teachers were undecided about mix-age grouping of students, 30% felt that the age difference may present problems, and 10% felt some students would benefit from this environment. Eighty percent of the teachers felt that students shouldn't be grouped homogeneously, and 10% were undecided and 10% felt that homogeneously setting makes it better for students to learn. Forty percent of the teachers were undecided if raising standards would meet the needs of students who are at risk, 40% felt that raising standards would not meet the needs of these students, and 20% felt that students need to know what is expected of them.

## DISCUSSION

I discovered that many teachers don't socially promote students who have below average grades, but administrative philosophy wants them to remain with their peers. Most teachers felt that the early grades are the most important years in a student's life, because this is the time that they learn basic concepts. This is the best time to retain a student and build up their foundation of learning skills.

All teachers agreed that small class size reduces a student chance of being retained. There would be less distractions and more individualized attention. In reviewing my data I wasn't surprised that teachers did not want a longer day, but the percentages were closer for a longer school year. Many teachers felt that a longer day doesn't guarantee students achievement, since both teacher and students need a break. A longer school year would be good for students since some forget what they have learned over the summer months.

We are fast approaching the 21st century where social promotion and retention need to be abandoned and new solutions have to be put into place. Early intervention programs for at risk students need to be put into place. Educational reforms have to be proven models and adhere to higher standards of achievement and the belief that all students can learn. Success will depend on how well a program is implemented so students are challenged by higher standards. Understanding the factors that may put a student at-risk, and developing programs of "intensive care" to insure that they do not fall between the cracks.

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